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Wm. Lloyd Garrison.

An Address at the Garrison Centenary

December 10, 1905

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Two Examples of the Negro's Courage, Physical and Moral*

BY BURT G. WILDER, B.S., M.D.

PROFESSOR OF NEUROLOGY AND VERTEBRATE ZOOLOGY, CORNELL UNIVERSITY. AFTER SERVING FOR A YEAR AS MEDICAL CADET WAS ASSISTANT SURGEON AND LATER SURGEON OF THE FIFTY-FIFTH REGIMENT OF MASSACHUSETTS VOLUNTEERS (COLORED).

William Lloyd Garrison has been called "The Moral Crusader." The title was given by Goldwin Smith, to whom the same title now applies more fully than to any other living man.

Garrison devoted the middle half of his long life (to quote his own words in the final issue of the "Liberator"), "To the extermination of chattel slavery." He strove to free this country from an inherited curse; a curse to the whites no less than to the blacks; for a system under which, without adequate legal or social restraints, it was possible to lash the men and debauch the women, could not fail to degrade the tyrant as well as the victim.

Garrison himself was a non-resistant. Steadfast to that superhuman principle, his moral courage carried him through trials that will doubtless be described by others. But in the eldest son that same quality took the form of going counter to the wishes and prayers of his beloved parents. When, in the spring of 1863, Gov. Andrew was empowered to enlist troops of African descent, George Thompson Garrison became a lieutenant in the Fifty-fifth, the second of the two Massachusetts Colored regiments; he was promoted captain and mustered out as major by brevet. As further exemplifying the transmission or inculcation, or both, of moral activity, another son has long been associated with a publishing house whose output never includes the literary garbage that is so popular and so profitable; a third has been identified for forty years with a journal that, by a sort of apostolic succession, upholds the standard of the Liberator and represents the tenderest elements of the national conscience.

Was the "Moral Crusader" justified? Was his crusade worth while?

Garrison demanded that, in exchange for mere permission to exist and breed as a beast of burden, the Negro should have the right to live as a man.

By some it may still be maintained that the Negro shrinks from peril; that, at best, he may follow blindly where others lead; that he lives only in the present; and that he will commonly sacrifice principle to expediency.

In refutation of these doctrines there is abundant documentary evidence respecting certain episodes in the service of the Fifty-fifth Massachusetts; but for the statements in this address I am depending largely upon my daily letters of the period, all which have been preserved; facts beyond my personal observation have been derived from other members of the regiment and from the "Record" that was privately printed in 1868, mainly from the letters and diaries of Col. Charles B. Fox.

Following the Fifty-fourth (whose disastrous yet glorious and epoch-making repulse at Fort Wagner was fitly commemorated eight years ago at the dedication of the monument to its leader, Robert Gould Shaw), in August, 1863, the Fifty-fifth began its

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service as part of the army of occupation and siege upon the Sea Islands just south of Charleston Harbor. Between the city and the islands, Morris, Folly and Long, in our possession, intervened James, several miles each way, crossed by continuous and lofty earthworks ending at either shore with extensive and heavily armed forts. The fort at the eastern end and nearest our lines was called Battery Lamar. The islands are separated by sluggish creeks with soft banks and bottoms and bordered by marshes the nature of which is well indicated by the legend as to an engineer officer's request for some men with legs fifteen feet long.

In June, 1864, it was believed that the Confederate troops on James Island had been materially reduced in number, and there was planned a simultaneous assault at three points, north, south, and intermediate. This third point of attack, Rivers Causeway, was the objective of a force of about one thousand men, drawn nearly equally from three regiments. Crossing in boats by night, the troops were massed on Tiger Island, a small appendage, so to speak, of James, from which it was separated by a strip of marsh already ascertained to be firmer than most. The advance began just before dawn, the intention being to drive in the expected infantry and cavalry outposts at Rivers Causeway, and to take Battery Lamar by surprise. But at the Causeway, while struggling through the mud, the natural thickets, and the artificial obstructions, the two regiments in advance suddenly received a discharge of canister from two twelve-pound Napoleon guns that, unknown to our authorities, were stationed at that point.

Engraved by John P. Davis, Secretary of the American Society of Wood-Engravers, for the "Wilder Quarter-Century Book," 1893.

Canister has now been supplanted by shrapnel, but it was sufficiently destructive; the balls made a horrible noise and inflicted fearful wounds. The guns were served rapidly and effectively. The two regiments in advance wavered and were thrown into confusion. The Fifty-fifth was in reserve, but already under fire. Whether or not orders to advance were issued by the commander of the expedition, there is no evidence that such orders were received by the Fifty-fifth. While the officers hesitated, in doubt as to what should be done, the men, undismayed by the panic of the troops in front and by the wounds and death among themselves, spontaneously charged, drove off the enemy and captured the guns. As yet I have been unable to ascertain what enlisted men led this charge and I appeal to the fast thinning survivors for records or recollections on that question.

It may be asked, "Why select the action at Rivers Causeway to illustrate the valor and the initiative capacity of the Colored soldier?" Surely not because it was the largest or bloodiest. Out of the (say) three-hundred of the Fifty-fifth engaged twenty-eight were killed or wounded, about one in ten. At Honey Hill, Nov. 30, where was seriously wounded the Colonel (now General A. S. Hartwell, late Judge of the Supreme Court at the Sandwich Islands), the casualties included one-half the officers and one-third the men engaged.

No; Rivers Causeway is selected because, on that occasion, the enlisted men of the Fifty-fifth went into action, and did more than they were ordered, after having served for a year without a dollar of pay and with scanty assurance that just payment would be made soon, if ever. This momentous fact is embodied in the following draft of an inscription for the monument that some day should be erected:

Inscription:

In memory of members of the Fifty-fifth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry (Colored), who lost their lives at Rivers Causeway, James Island, South Carolina, July second, 1864.

Private James Davis (Ind.), Co. A.

Private Lewis Peck (Mo.), Co. B.

Corp'l Henry T. Powell (O.), Co. C.

Private Wm. H. Russell (Ind.), Co. C.

Private Isaiah H. Thompson (O.), Co. C.

Private Dallas Scott (Ind.), Co. G.

Private Wm. H. Johnson (O.), Co. I.

Sergt. Wm. J. Stedman (Pa.), Co. I.

Corp'l Alonzo Boon (Boston, Mass.), Co. K.

Private Benj. Griffin (Ky.), Co. K.

Private Finley Rickman (O.), Co. K.

Enlisted a year before, under promise of pay equal to that of white soldiers, they refused to accept less, and they died without having received a dollar from the government they helped to preserve.

In their faithful service, in their stand for justice, and in their heroic death they manifested courage, not physical only but also moral.

Of physical courage there is no lack; there never has been and there never will be. The fighting instinct has come down to us little diminished from the blood-thirsty sharks of our remote ancestry. But, whatever may have been its rudiments among animals, moral courage, the abnegation of self for the sake of principle, the main constituent of civic virtue, this is comparatively recent in origin and comparatively rare in manifestation.

It is to an extraordinary and too little known manifestation of moral courage by the black soldiers of the Fifty-fifth (and Fifty-fourth as well), that your attention is now directed. These two regiments were enlisted in Massachusetts under the following order from the Secretary of War:

War Department,

"Washington City, Jan. 26, 1863.

"Ordered: That Governor Andrew, of Massachusetts, is authorized, until further orders, to raise such number of volunteer companies of artillery for duty in the forts of Massachusetts and elsewhere, and such corps of infantry for the volunteer military service, as he may find convenient; such volunteers to be enlisted for three years or until sooner discharged, and may include persons of African descent, organized into separate corps. He will make the usual needful requisitions on the appropriate staff bureaus and officers for the proper transportation, organization, supplies, subsistence, arms, and equipments of such volunteers.

"EDWIN M. STANTON,
"Secretary of War."

As stated by Governor Andrew, "In no respect did the troops raised under this order differ, as to provision by the order for their organization, rights, liabilities, or pay, from any other regiments of volunteers."

Nevertheless, in November, 1863, when the paymaster first appeared, the enlisted men were offered, not the pay of soldiers, thirteen dollars per month, but ten, the pay of laborers. Their officers advised them to take it for the sake of themselves and their families. No; they declared they would accept nothing less than their rightful pay as soldiers; and they adhered to this determination even when the State of Massachusetts sent special commissioners with the money in hand to make up the difference. The misconstruction of the law was not adjusted until the Fifty-fourth had been in service for a year and a half and the Fifty-fifth for a year and a quarter.

But, you say, during all that period of waiting was there no protest? No open denunciation of wrong? No exhibition of a mutinous spirit under such injustice? Yes; but chiefly by men of little character who were disposed to make trouble on other accounts. To the everlasting credit of the regiment and of the race such demonstrations were so few and so slight that history might well ignore them, were it not that one instance may render the whole situation more appreciable. In the spring of 1864, after the men had served for nine months without pay, an officer was forcibly resisted by one of the men. The offender was tried by court-martial, sentenced, and shot by members of his own regiment. Consider it. The government that found no law to pay him excepting as a laborer could, nevertheless, find law enough to shoot him as a soldier.

When, at the end of September, 1864, tardy justice at last was done, the occasion presented three notable features. **Firstly**, it was celebrated, not with noise and disorder (like some football victories of "educated" whites), but by addresses and music. **Secondly**, there were promptly and fully paid all loans from the officers, and all indebtedness to the sutler who had sold on credit for months. **Thirdly**, in addition to amounts remitted by mail or otherwise, there was sent home, by Adams Express alone, from the Fifty-fifth Regiment of Colored Infantry, over sixty thousand dollars!! Then, surely was the "Moral Crusader" justified; then was his crusade proved to have been worth while.

Were such an opportunity as the Rivers Causeway action for the simultaneous display of physical and moral courage offered to white soldiers, what more could they do than was done by the black soldiers of the Fifty-fifth?

Let us not vaunt ourselves upon our color. Who are the leaders of Tammany Hall? Who are the mismanagers of insurance companies? Who compose the lynching mobs and the gangs of college hazers? Whites. Neither let us evade the responsibilities of our color. Who were the importers of the first Negro slaves, and who were the progenitors of multitudes of their descendants? White men again.

William Lloyd Garrison has been dead now more than a quarter of a century. Should he revisit this world he would find conditions that would warrant him in saying: Doubtless this is a big country, and doubtless we are a mighty people. We do not forget these facts ourselves, and we are

concerned lest they be forgotten by others. But this nation will not be truly great until its obligations to the Afro-American are recognized and fulfilled; until, throughout the land, under tests as to character, intelligence, and property identical with those applied to immigrants (which tests I hold should be higher), there are assured full civil and political rights to the men who, under conditions so monstrous as almost to surpass belief, exhibited the highest type of moral and physical courage; who toiled and watched; who fought and bled and died for the honor of their race and for the perpetuation of this republic.

APPENDIX.

1. The Captured Guns were Turned and Fired upon the Retreating Foe.—On page 24 is briefly described the unordered charge of the enlisted men at Rivers Causeway and the capture of the two twelve-pound Napoleon guns that had killed or wounded nearly one-tenth of their number. By inadvertence the text omits a feature of this incident that was included in the spoken address.

One of the companies engaged, F, largely recruited in Boston, had been trained with artillery. On expeditions some of its members always carried friction-primers and a lanyard "in case of emergency." Surely this was a very unexpected emergency. The guns were hastily turned, loaded with ammunition found upon the ground, and fired after the retreating Confederates. Just how many of these unconventional discharges were made will probably never be known; but my letter of the period speaks of "shots," so there must have been at least two.

At the Centenary I reached the hall after the other speakers had taken their seats, and at first, therefore, saw only those nearest me. But after my address, on turning to take my seat, I beheld one of the very men who turned those guns more than forty years ago. He was Lieutenant Charles L. Mitchell, then a sergeant of Co. F, afterward severely wounded at Honey Hill. For many years he has been employed in the Boston Custom House.

2. A Novelist's Needless Error. The Skull of the Negro resembles that of the White far more nearly than it does that of an Ape.—In the course of a paper, "The Statements and Opinions of Jeffries Wyman as to the Anthropoid Apes and their Approximation to Man," read before the American Anthropological Association at Ithaca, N. Y., December 28, 1905, I referred substantially as follows to certain passages in the serial story, "Lady Baltimore," in the Saturday Evening Post (of Philadelphia) for December 9:

The author, Mr. Owen Wister, makes the relator (evidently portrayed as a man of at least average intelligence and discrimination) behave thus. When shown three skulls, viz., of an Aryan (ordinary white), of a gorilla, and of a South Carolina "nigger" (to quote a word that I would not otherwise employ), he recognizes a "gap" between the first and the other two, but between those two a "brotherhood, a kinship which stares you in the face;" he avows that "the difference in their names was the only difference he saw between them," i.e., between the skulls of a gorilla and of a Negro.

Before expressing my own opinion I quote a paragraph from the first scientific account of the gorilla, in the Boston Journal of Natural History, vol. 5, Aug. 18, 1847. Its author, Professor Jeffries Wyman of Harvard university, was noted for his freedom from prejudice, for his accuracy of observation, and for his clearness of expression. He says (using, as was then the custom, orang as a general term for the tailless or anthropoid apes, and thus as embracing not only the true orang, but the chimpanzee and the gorilla):

"Any anatomist who will take the trouble to compare the skeletons of the Negro and the orang cannot fail to be struck at sight with the wide

gap which separates them. The difference between the cranium, etc., in the Negro and Caucasian (here used, like Aryan, as a term for the white race) sinks into comparative insignificance when compared with the vast difference which exists between the conformation of the same parts in the Negro and the orang."

Under Jeffries Wyman I began to compare the skulls of men and apes in the fall of 1859, nor has my interest in them ceased merely because it is now surpassed by my interest in their brains. Not to risk the "mixing up of things" which Mrs. Carlyle so aptly denounced as "the great bad," let us agree that (1) there are racial differences, and (2) when all things are considered, the whites have advanced further than the blacks from our ape-like ancestors.

But I believe the present state of our knowledge warrants the following propositions: First, in an assemblage of adult male skulls of the apes and of the various human races, a child would unhesitatingly separate the men from the apes, and might go further and set apart the gorilla by reason of the prominent bony crests. Secondly, among three skulls such as are indicated in the story, the expert anatomist might recognize one as presenting certain features that are more often found in Africans; but even to him and, a fortiori, to the layman, these peculiarities, as compared (to use Wyman's phrase) with the "vast difference between the Negro and the Gorilla, would sink into comparative insignificance."

The validity of these propositions may be ascertained from any comparative anatomist or anthropologist, or from the collections in most large cities; at least two such are in Philadelphia, the residence of the novelist.

Even if the misstatement is qualified or retracted in the book form of "Lady Baltimore," the atonement will be far from adequate. I print this note, (and trust it may be reprinted) as an authoritative correction of an injurious scientific error, and as an antidote to the political venom that characterizes several passages of the story.

3. The Play of "The Clansman" Belated and Malignant.—A kindred poisonous spirit permeates "The Clansman," the play based upon Mr. Thomas Dixon's "The Clansman" and "The Leopard's Spots." Whatever its merits as a melodrama, as a vehicle of incident and doctrine it is as objectionable and uncalled for as is its counterpart, "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Indeed, far more so, since Slavery is dead, and its dramatic representation has little more personal application than would the portrayal of making bricks without straw by the Israelites under their Egyptian taskmasters.

But "The Clansman," like certain novels and magazine articles, not only arouses racial animosity, but is apparently produced with that end in view. Its author is reported to favor "colonization of the Negro." Pending the consummation of that enterprise, unquestionably stupendous and problematically possible, desirable, or just, these writers seem not averse to exciting the passions of the ignorant and thoughtless and converting prejudice into fear and hatred. They would have us believe that a "Black Peril" is real and imminent; they recall the chaotic and distressing period of "reconstruction;" they dwell upon assaults upon white women, and they demand, "Would you have your daughter marry a nigger?"

This last I believe to be a factitious "bug-a-boo." Outside the slums I never heard of a case; neither, for that matter, do white women commonly marry Japanese or Hindoos. Yet where is the logic of the interdiction? But for the tragic aspect of the whole subject there would be something ludicrously inconsistent in the horror at the mere entrance of an African male into a southern mansion (otherwise than in a menial capacity, when far more intimate relations of occupants of those mansions with African females are attested by the numerous mulattoes, some of them rightly bearing "first family" names.

No one denies that there have been instances of the "unmentionable crime." Yet, if we eliminate sympathy for the individual victim and her relatives, the equally indescribable

expiations will leave scant balance in favor of the "imperial race" that inflicts or condones them.

There are plenty of vile and worthless Negroes. There are likewise many worthy and noble. As an officer of colored troops during the civil war both kinds came under my observation. There is no one declaration that it gives me more pride and pleasure to make than this: No white troops could display greater devotion, virtue and valor than was displayed by enlisted men of the 55th Massachusetts infantry, colored.

To Mr. Thomas Dixon, to Mr. Owen Wister, and to those who think and feel with them, is respectfully commended the address delivered in Boston by Booker T. Washington, L.L. D., (Harvard), May 31, 1897, at the unveiling of the monument of Col. Robert Gould Shaw.

BURT G. WILDER.

Ithaca, N. Y., Jan. 6, 1906.

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